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Ram Setu - The Mystery

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Abstract

The great story of *Ramayana* has finally been put in the hearts of the Sanatani people of India. It is more interesting that apart from Sanatana religion, the *Ramayana* has been mentioned in some heterodox religions like Jainism and Buddhism. Passing analysis to the story have even been included in the earliest of the Tamil corpus-Sangam literature. Despite such successful reach of the *Ramayana* to the heart of every Sanatani people, it has become hard to omit the myth part from the historic part. This research highlights the bridge construction process of the so-called Ram.

Keywords: *Setu, Gulf, Passage, Beach, Sea, Island, Ceylon, Ramayana, Naval.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sethu-Samu dram is a proposed marine channel between India and Sri Lanka across Adam's bridge. It is the stretched part of the sea between India and Sri Lanka. This bridge is an almost 48-kilometer-long isthmus of shifting shoals on the shallow portion of the Indian ocean between India's Pamban Island and Sri Lanka's Thalaimannar. It is named as Palk strait. This article is a broad and detailed enquiry into the subject of the reality of the Ram Setu. Some authors wrote in some research papers related with this theme. I have taken a lot of help from internet to complete the research paper.

Results

Adam's bridge is believed to have been built by an army of monkeys led by Hanuman on behalf of the avatar Lord Ram. This bridge was made to help the monkey army to cross the Sea to reach the Ravana-land. Their purpose was to rescue Sita from the grab of Ravana in Ashoka Garden inside Ravana's palace. In Abrahamic mythology, Adam's bridge is believed to be Adam's footprints from the time of his expulsion from paradise, his ascension on Earth in Sri Lanka and his crossing the ocean into India.

Discussion

Actually, Adam's bridge is an unbelievable miracle of nature. It is an epistemological confusion for island studies. The Sethu-Samu dram project was stopped by a 2013 verdict of the supreme court of India. Honoring the religious sensitivity of the Sanatani people, the verdict was implemented. The project was proposed as a navigable pass for large cargo ships across Adam's bridge. Since the first plan of coastal development of the region were floated in 1955, there has been great ambiguity on whether dredging the tombolo would destroy the segment of the land water assemblage revered as Ram Setu. In the year 1955, the Mudaliar committee was appointed to study the possibility of Setu-Samu dram. According to the report of the Mudaliar committee Adam's bridge was very much unsuitable for dredging¹. As per the suggestion of this committee dredging around Rameswaram or Pamban Pass can be double. Further, colonial geological information paradoxically highlighted a benevolent interpretation of Ram Setu's mythology by British historians and scientists. It asks the question of the agency of that interpretation and the problem of the insider/outsider binary while determining the legal, environmental, political, geological and sacred history of Adam's bridge.

Actually, two types of belief existed in our country on the matter of Ram Setu. Some people think it is a

manmade or nature made bridge. Some other people think touch of God is behind the construction of Ram Setu. Without understanding how the colonial state saw Adam's bridge, we may wrongly infer that today's national list assertions of its sacred mythography stem from an anticolonial praxis to restore a politics of enchantment within Indian modernity.

It is very important to consider the nationalist voices, largely highlighted by the right-wing BJP (central ruling party-Bhartiya Janata Party), RSS (Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and the *Sangh Parivar*, in general, and liberal voices representing the Congress (Indian National Congress), or regional political voices such as the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) and AIADMK (All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), have dated the origins of the Sethu- Samu dram to the colonial era, erroneously prolonging the implication that the British government aided plans of demolishing Adam's bridge.

We can find similarity between Adam's bridge historiography and the historiography of ancient and imperial Chinese sacred islands, which were traditionally seen as homes of Gods and Dragon kings, under Taoist and Buddhist influences, 19th century colonial India saw the parallel evolution of sacred traditions of Pamban Island with the abject condition of Andaman Cellular prison like in China. This is referred to as *Kalapini* (or dark water), in Indian parlance the Cellular jail was the anchor of a convict colony that the British Government thought the Pamban Island as a sacred shrine. Here pilgrims came to find an enlightened life.

The colonial state despite its policy of marginalizing Indian heritages and languages since Macaulay's Minute (1835)- highlighted a stance of compatibilism or, at worst, non-coercive scientism towards Pamban sacred mythography. The colonial government was influenced by oriental list and non-western epistemes of seeing and thinking about island geographies complicates the Tria lectic between colonial, anti-colonial and decolonial.

Ramaswamy told- 'The lost land of Lemurian underscores- 'the ontological challenges of decolonial island studies, from mythic fabulations to the periphery of national imaginaries, as many island societies have found themselves in the post-independence phase.'² Ramaswamy's (2004, P.15) 'hegemony of the real and the visible is deeply appropriate regarding the abject status of -

'Those place making imaginations that are necessarily rooted in disciplinary geography's normative planetary consciousness that transformed the globe into a disenchanted place over the course of the imperial nineteenth century, disavowed imagination in favor of

empirical reason, and that consolidated (the metropolitan) man as the all-knowing subject and master of all he surveyed they remind me..... that our earth can continue to be an enchanted realm even after being colonized by modern science.’³

Archaeological excavation (1903-04) at Adichchanallur, District Tutukudi was led by Alexander Rea. He recorded very unorthodox findings there. He felt that all cultural assemblages in the far south had its origin or influence from here only. A great scholar Kenedy K.A.R. had analyze in full detail and finalized that all such assemblages like megalithic burials can even be regarded as an overflow of from south India. According to Maloney C.T. even the experimentation in the early state formation especially between regions of the far south of the peninsular India and SriLanka located on both the sides of the Palk strait have many common features. S.K. Sitar ambalam studied the urn burial site of Pomparippu, south of Mannar. He found a lot of similarity in between them and such sites in Madurai, Tirunelveli and Ramanathapuram districts. While Pomparippu holds the iron age key of far south archaeological site Mantai, District Mannar, Sr had yielded artifacts from paleolithic age to 17th century AD and they are analogous to the findings of the mainland. The similar culture of SriLankan and the far south of India derives one to probe whether the travel route even during the iron age period and later was through waterway or by land. A detailed experiment is done here with the available archaeological and numismatic evidence to point out the sea passages used by sailing ships in ancient times to cross the area which divide SriLanka from India (Fig.1).

The experiment was very fantastic. This kind of experiments is really very relevant for this type of enquiry. These experiments are really very tough to do. Very remarkable bravery is required for this type of research. The financial resources are required in very high range. But the curiosity is much required. This kind of experiments require a great patience because the pieces of archaeological evidence find here are very fine and precious.

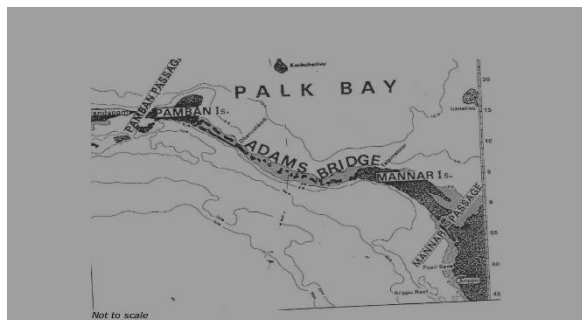


Fig.1- The geographical location that connect the Indian mainland and SriLanka which are culturally united in early period are known as Palk strait (India) and the Gulf of Mannar (SriLanka).

A deep look on the sketch map described the difficulties of navigation in the above area. Dividing the Gulf of Mannar on the south from the strait on the north is chain of islands, reefs, shoals and shallows, consisting of island of Mannar, Ram Setu, the island of Pamban and Rameswaram. Consequently, the strait is flanked by two ancient temples – Ramanatha temple and Thiruketeswara temple on Indian and SriLankan sides respectively. On Indian side it is important because of its connection with the epic *Ramayana*. On the other side it is also important because the Mantai is the place is associated with Man Mandodari, the daughter of Mayon the spouse of Ravana. Mantai is also found in Tamil Shaiva literature especially in the songs of Thiru jnana Sambandan and Sundaram-Oti Nayanar of 7th to 8th century AD. Manickavasakar the author of Thiruvasakam refers to Shaiva here as conferring boon on Mandodari. Thiru jnana Samandar referred Thirukedeswaram as Matto tam a mangrove on beach, but more vivid description figures in Sundaram Oti Nayanar songs. He described the place situated on the banks of the Polari river and flooded by the water of the Bay of Bengal.

From the Tamil epigraphical records both in Tamil Nadu and SriLanka, it can be said that the Cholas contributed very much for the development of temple there. It was known as Rajarajeswaram and town was named as Rajajapuram. It was very nicely furnished like the Brihadisvara temple at Thanjavur. The Chola inscription from Pancheri highlighted a lot of about the glory of this temple. The kings of SriLanka patronized it until the Portuguese and Western power had empowered SriLanka.

It is very evident from the above analysis that both the ends at Palk straits in India and the Gulf of Mannar at SriLanka were culturally united and could have contacts through these ends only from Ramayan period to that of late medieval period.

In case of Pamban passage a lot of proofs concluded that in Dutch and Portuguese times it was lesser depth than the Mannar passage. The Dutch governor of Ceylon wrote- ‘The Pamban meaning Snake River, owing to its numerous curves and windings was hardly six feet depth at highest tide.....’⁴

The Portuguese writer Queiroz analyzed that the Pamban channel is less than two fathoms deep and shallower than the Mannar channel, and that vessels going through had to unload their cargo.

According to Hunter's *'Imperial Gazetteer'*, XI.22, the ancient records preserved in the temple of Rameswaram mention that -

In the year 1480 AD a violent storm breached the isthmus, and that, despite efforts to restore the connection, subsequent storms rendered the breach permanent.

He further comments that-

'I cannot find that the pioneer work of the Portuguese in the cutting of the channel was carried out by Joao Fernandez Correa in 1549, when the Jesuit father Antinio, was murdered by natives.'⁵

It is also corroborated by literary reference in Sinhalese invasion of Pandya during reign of Parakramabahu (1153-1186 AD) was found narrated. Chola and Chalukya empire also put great importance in this incident (Fig.2).

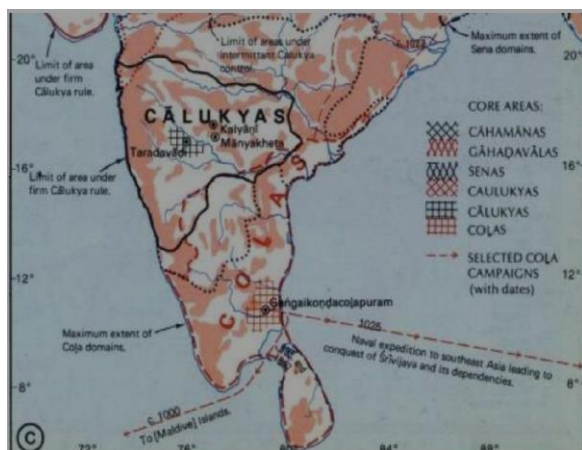


Fig.2- Conquest of Srivijaya

If Pamban passage was not there then the troops had to operate through Mantei. Scholars like Nicholas concluded from the above-mentioned analysis that there was no navigable Pamban passage and that the isthmus was continuous from Pamban Island on both sides. At that period Mantei was a famous seaport, the Pamban passage did not exist and the only navigable seaway between Gulf of Mannar and the Palk strait was the Mannar passage. So, it is evident from the analysis that the obstructions in the form of geological natural formations or manmade structures resisted navigation between Rameswaram and Sri Lanka. A hint about the existence of a walkable way or road mentioned by Pliny the Roman writer in the beginning of the 1st millennium AD.

Pliny said-

'The sea between the island (i.e. Sri Lanka and India) is full of shallows not more than six paces (two and a half Fathoms) in depth, but in some channels so deep that no anchors can find the bottom. For this reason, ships are built with prows at each end. To obviate the necessity of their turning about in channels of extreme narrowness. The tonnage of the vessels is 3,000 'amphorae' (about 75 tons).'⁶

During the reign of Augustus, the Sinhalese Ambassadors went to Rome. They reported-

The seas between India and Ceylon are of a vivid green and that a great number of trees grew at the bottom so that the rudders of ship frequently break their crests of by trees.

The above-mentioned report describes an onshore journey than offshore.

So, without any doubt it can be concluded that the Romans during their long period of friendly trade with Ceylon from the 1st century to 3rd century made regular use of Mannar on both onward and return voyages. Examples of using the Palk strait for navigation in the ancient period could not be proved. It is now very much necessary for marine archaeological investigation to finely scan the area to find out the nature of pathway in between the Palk strait and Gulf of Mannar.

Historical sources evidence the fact that Ram Setu was a land bridge linking Bharata and Lanka for many millennia. The following maps and images are principally drawn from Schwartzberg Atlas, 1978 (Fig.3).

During the time of the pre-Mauryan empire (from 6th century BCE), the sacred site called Koti gains prominence. This is cut short from Dhanus Koti, evoking the *Ramayana* narration of Sri Rama confronting *Samudra Raja* (king of Ocean) by fixing the end of his bow at this island. This island links with Lanka at Tamba panni or Tamra Parni (at a place called Mahatittha, meaning Maha Tirtha, or great Tirhasthana) through Setu Bandha.

During the Satavahana-Saka-Kushana age (1-300 A.D), Rameswaram close to Dhanus Koti got reputation as a sacred site.

Puranic India (Bharata) '*Setuka*' as the bridge joining Bharata (Pandya Kingdom) and Lanka (then called Simhala).

Koti (Dhanus Koti) and Mahatittha continue to be holy, religious places during post Mauryan period, from circa 200 BCE.

The area adjacent the Ram Setu constitutes the limits of regions under the empire of Rashtrakuta during the age Gurjara-Pratiharas, Palas, and Rashtrakutas, circa 700-795 AD.

Naval expedition to Southeast Asia leading to conquest of Sri Vijaya and its dependencies proceeds from Gangai Konda Chola Puram and contacts are also established with Maldive Islands circa 1000 AD going through the Gulf of Mannar. An Ajanta fresco depicts the arrival of king Vijaya in this region.

In the period of Islamic expansion and changing western views of south Asia, between 7th –12th centuries, the Ram Setu between Rameswaram and Markaya is also called Setu Bandha (evoking the Prakrit Kavya written in the 6th century by king Pravara Sena with the title Setu Bandha or Ravana Vaho).

During the period of Khaljis and Tughluqs (1290-1390 AD) in south Asia the island on Lankan side referred to Mannara (later called Talai Mannar).

At the peak time of Bhakti movement, the bridge area gets referred to as Setu bandha Rameswaram, as a sacred site.

NASA and ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization) images finely highlight the land bridge between Bharata and Sri Lanka. These historical references to Ram Setu come alive as an immortal tradition of the *Bharatiya* civilization.

According to 'Ceylon-an account of the island' by Sir James Emerson Tennent, KCS, LLD compiling exclusively to Lanka web by Tilaks. Fernando-

On the north-west side of the Island, where the currents are checked by the obstruction of Adam's Bridge and still water prevails in the Gulf of Mannar, these deposits have been profusely heaped, and the low sandy pains have been proportionally extended; whilst on the south and east, where the current coast sweeps unimpeded along the coast, the line of the shore is bold and occasionally rocky. The explanation of the accretion and rising of the land is somewhat opposed to the popular belief that Ceylon was torn from the mainland of India by a convulsion, during which the Gulf of Mannar and the narrow channel at Pamban were formed by the submission of the adjacent land. The two theories might be reconciled by supposing the sinking to have occurred at an early period, and to have been followed by the uprising still in progress.

The matter is evident from the historical maps is that there was a bridge and that this was associated with Sri Rama according to the *Bharatiya* tradition since place names are normally assigned by the local people. The

maps are based on such information gathered from local residents about place and monument names.

The following map (Fig.4) shows the five feet Pamban Gap and Adam's bridge joining Dhanush Koti and Talai Mannar.



Fig4.- Joining of Dhanush Koti and Talai Mannar

Conclusion

Besides The *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* also refers to the continued protection of Nala Setu following the command of Sri Rama. Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* also refers it to the Setu of mountains. Apart from these, *Skanda Purana*⁷, *Vishnu Purana*⁸, *Agni Purana*⁹, *Brahma Purana*¹⁰ refer to the founding of Ram Setu.

Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsa* mentioned- 'Rama, while returning from Sri Lanka in Pushpak Vimana.'¹¹

It means in detail- 'Behold, Sita, My Setu of mountains dividing this frothy ocean is like the milky way dividing the sky into two parts.'

King Pravara Sena II (550-600 CE) called 'Setu Bandha or Ravana Vaho' in a Kavya in Prakrit language. In 5th century the king Damodara Sen wrote '*Dasa Muha Vadha*' (*Setu bandha Kavya*).

Dr. Daises Teatro Suzuki, (translated the Lank avatar Sutra, the great sutra of Mahayana Buddhism, from Sanskrit to other languages) says-

'As in the case with other Buddhist texts it is quite impossible with our present knowledge of Indian history to decide the age of the *Sutra*. The one thing that is certain is that it was compiled before 443 CE

when the first Chinese translation is reported to have been attempted.

Even with the text that was in existence before 443CE we don't know how it developed, for it was not surely written from the beginning as one complete piece of work as we write a book in these modern days. Some parts of it must be older than others, since there is no doubt that it has many layers of added passages.^{'12}

Lank Avatara Sutra and Ramayana share a lot of similarities. Even ten headed Ravana and Kumbhakarna, Ashok Vatika, ocean and so many other points tally. In the *Sutra*, Ravana is

described as the king of Lanka who was unwilling to learn the truth from Buddha and invites him across the ocean into Sri Lanka.

Skanda Purana describes the foundation of three Shiva Linga at the end, middle and beginning of Ram Setu and making the same bridge sunk and thereby highlighted *Setu Teerth*.¹³

It is also linked with *Kurma Purana*¹⁴. *Garuda Purana*¹⁵ enlisted holy sites including Setu Bandh and Rameswar. *Narada Purana*¹⁶ praises the greatness of Ram Setu.

Valmiki describes construction of this bridge: -

"I am a son born of Viswakarma's own loins. I am equal to Viswakarma. This god of ocean has reminded me. The great ocean spoke the truth. Being unasked, I have not told you my details earlier. I am capable of constructing a bridge across the ocean. Hence, let the foremost of monkeys build the bridge now itself. Then being sent by Rama, hundreds and thousands of monkey heroes jumped in joy on all sides towards the great forest. Those army chiefs of monkeys, who resembled mountains, broke the rocks and trees there and dragged them away towards the sea. Those monkeys filled the ocean with all types of trees like Sala and Asva Karna, Dhava and bamboo, Kutaja, Arjuna, Palmyra, Tilaka, Tynisa, Bilva, Saptaparna, in blossom as also Mango and Asoka. The excellent monkeys, the forest animals lifted and brought, like Indra's flag posts, some trees with roots intact and some others without roots. From here and there the monkeys brought palmyra trees, Pomegranate shrubs, coconut and Vibhi taka, Karira, Bakula and Neem trees. The huge, bodied monkeys with mighty strength uprooted sized rocks and maintains and transported them by mechanical contrivances, the water, raised up due to sudden throwing of mountains in the sea, soured upward towards the sky from there again, gushed back. The rocks befalling on all sides perturbed the ocean. Some others draw up strings a hundred *Yojanas* long (to keep the rocks in a straight line) Nala on his

part initiated a monumented bridge in the middle of the ocean. The bridge was built at that time with the cooperation of other monkeys, or terrible doings. Some monkeys were holding poles for measuring the bridge and some others collected the material. Reeds and logs resembling clouds and mountains, brought by hundreds of monkeys, led by the command of Rama, fastened some parts of the bridge. Monkeys constructed the bridge with trees having blossom at the end of their boughs. Some monkeys looking like demons sized rocks resembling mountains and peaks of mountains and appeared running hither and thither. Then, a tumultuous sound occurred when the rocks were thrown into the sea and when mountains were caused to fall there. On the first day fourteen *yojanas* of bridge were constructed by the monkeys speedily, thrilled with delight as they were, resembling elephants. In the same manner on the second day twenty *Yojanas* of bridge were constructed speedily by the monkeys of terrific bodies and of mighty strength. Thus, on the third day twenty-one *Yojanas* of the bridge were constructed in the ocean speedily by the monkeys with their colossal bodies. On the fourth day, a further of twenty-two *yojanas* were constructed by the dashing monkeys with a great speed. In that manner on the fifth day the monkeys working quickly constructed twenty-three *yojanas* of the bridge up to other seashore. That Nala, the strong and illustrious son of Viswakarma and an excellent monkey-built bridge across the sea as truly as his father would have built it. That beautiful and lovely bridge constructed by Nala across the ocean the abode of alligators' snore brightly like a milky way of stars in the sky."¹⁷

Geological evidence suggests that the genesis of India and Sri Lanka are closely linked as both were part of the ancient super continent of Gondwana which drifted towards north in the Tethys Seas, crashing into another super continent called Laurasia about 35-55 million years ago to take up its present position. The land bridge can come up because of the fluctuations of the sea level associated with such tectonic activities and deglaciation.

In this research some biases may not be excluded from various analysis of various records, narratives, translations, etc. Ultimately it can be said that any fault in analysis and incitation is unintentional. It is absolutely true that a lot of research is still necessary to unfold the fold of the complete mystery of Ram Setu.

Endnotes

- 1) Mudaliar, 1957, P-5
- 2) S.Ramasawamy's book, 2004

3) Ibid., 15 (this refers to the page 15 of S.Ramaswamy's book, 2004)

4) Dutch governor of Ceylon, 1663

5) Hunter, 1881

6) Pliny, 1st Millennium A.D

7) Skanda Purana (III.1.2.1-114)

8) Vishnu Purana (IV.4.40-49)

9) Agni Purana (V-XI)

10) Brahma Purana (138.1-40)

11) Kalidasa's Raghuvamsa (sarga-13)

12) Dr. D.T Suzuki, 1932

13) Skanda Purana (VI.101.1-44)

14) Kurma Purana (21.10-61)

15) Garuda Purana (1.81-1-22)

16) Narada Purana (Uttara Bhag 76.1-20)

17) Valmiki Ramayan (2.22.50-2.22.72)

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